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### The Trail Of Tears

The Jackson administration witnessed one of the most inhumane injustices brought upon American people in the history of the United States. The Indian Removal Act displaced thousands of Native Americans from their ancestral lands in the name of “American” prosperity. Jackson felt this move was to the benefit of the Native Americans. What was it actually like for those who had to endure being forced from their ancestral lands and the torturous journey across harsh terrain from the eastern states to the Oklahoma Territory?

In the beginning of the nineteenth century the United States was rapidly expanding and needed more land to house its citizens. In the Southeastern United States there were five large Native American tribes: The Cherokee, the Creek, the Chickasaw, the Choctaw and the Seminole Nations. These Nations held large amounts of land in North Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Florida. The US government had been trying for several years to try to push the Native Americans out of their ancestral lands. Many signed treaties hoping to retain some of their lands by cooperating with the government, treaties that would prove unhelpful in later years.<sup>1</sup>

Andrew Jackson played a large part in the relocation of the Native Americans. In 1814 he led the U.S. forces that defeated the Creek Nation and by doing so gained 22 million acres of land from them in Alabama and Georgia. He also was a big player in the negotiations for most

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<sup>1</sup> PBS, "Indian Removal 1814-1858."

of the treaties in which the Native Americans lost their eastern ancestral lands in exchange for land west of the Mississippi River. Because of these treaties, the US gained control of most of the southern states in 1814 through 1824.<sup>2</sup>

Not all the Native Americans chose to leave. Some resisted and tried to assimilate. They gave some of their lands to the government, and kept, at least, part of the land for themselves and adopted western education, large scale farming practices and even slave-holding. This earned them the title the “Five Civilized Tribes.” Still white settlers taunted and attacked the Native Americans for want of their land; they would steal livestock, burn homes and trespass on the Native American’s lands. These hostilities would eventually provoke the first Seminole War, where fugitive slaves, who had been living among them for many years, fought alongside them. This enraged white settlers even further, and strengthened their potency in the war.<sup>3</sup>

The Cherokee sought legal means of maintaining control over their lands. They drew-up a constitution, based off of US Policies and the treaties they had previously signed, to become a sovereign nation. They went to the US government to protect them from the harassment of white settlers, but were ruled against in the Supreme Court. When they sought an appeal, they pushed to enforce the law that banned whites from living on the Native American’s territories<sup>4</sup>. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Cherokees; however, Jackson, who was now President of the United States, refused to uphold the ruling.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> PBS, "Indian Removal 1814-1858."

<sup>3</sup> PBS, "Indian Removal 1814-1858."

<sup>4</sup> This law created to prevent sympathetic missionaries from promoting Native American resistance

<sup>5</sup> PBS, "Indian Removal 1814-1858."

In his second year of office, President Jackson pushed the “Indian Removal Act” through Congress. This was enforced peacefully for the tribes who agreed, for those who didn’t Jackson would force them out. Jackson patronizingly felt this was in fact to the benefit of the Native Americans because they were getting new lands and would be away from White conflicts and suppression and free to govern themselves the way they wanted to. This began the brutal and inhuman removal of the remaining Native Americans in the Southeastern states. Over the next nearly thirty years the removal of the Native American people would become increasingly violent, culminating with US forces being sent in to “round-up” the Native Americans, forcing them to march what would become known as the “Trail of Tears.”<sup>6</sup>

In 1838, Andrew Jackson ordered 7,000 troops to forcibly remove the 15,000 remaining Cherokee Indians from their homes.<sup>7</sup> The troops stormed their homes and led them out at bayonet point and loaded them into stockades, without giving them any time to grab personal belongings, blankets or even shoes with which to endure the upcoming winter months. Many were led from their homes and had to watch their homes being looted and even burned behind them by white looters. One woman, by the name of Joanna Jones nee McGhee<sup>8</sup>, said her mother told her:

*“The white people would come into their houses and look things over and when they found something that they liked, they would say, “This is mine, I am going to have it”, etc. When they were gathering their things to start they were driven from their homes*

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6 PBS, “Indian Removal 1814-1858.”

7 PBS, “Indian Removal 1814-1858.”

8 Burns, Mannie L. “Family Stories from the Trail of Tears: Joanna Jones nee McGhee.”

*and collected together like so many cattle. Some would try to take along something which they loved, but were forced to leave it, if it was of any size.<sup>9</sup>*

Many, including prominent Chief John Ross, never thought they would actually be forced from their homes but now their journey began with many Native Americans being ill-prepared.<sup>10</sup> A woman retells how, for her grandmother, the removal seemed swift and unexpected when they received the order and saw over loaded wagons passing their homes. The harsh reality didn't sink in until those wagons stopped at their own home and soldiers charged in and commanded them to grab what they could hold and get in the wagons. She says, "This was just the beginning of much weeping and heartaches."<sup>11</sup>

Part of the group left during the end of summer and endured the long, treacherous journey suffering with as many five people dying each day due to drought and disease. The larger groups left later in the fall, as requested by the Cherokees, but this time would prove no better than the summer journey. Sallie Farney, a member of the Muskogee tribe made the trip herself and retold the story to her family. Her granddaughter Mary Hill told the story to Billie Bird, a member of the Federal Writers Project. This story is a harrowing account of the many horrors endured by the Native Americans forced to make this trek. She tells Billie that that after they were ripped from all their belonging and their homes they were herded into stockades, where they were to wait until it was time to begin the march<sup>12</sup>.

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9 Burns, Mannie L. "Family Stories from the Trail of Tears: Joanna Jones nee McGhee."

10 Nation Park Service "Stories of the Trail of Tears."

11 Bird, Billie "Family Stories from the Trail of Tears: Mary Hill."

12 Bird, Billie "Family Stories from the Trail of Tears: Mary Hill."

Everyone was forced to walk the eight hundred or more miles to their destination. Children, pregnant woman, even the elderly who could manage had to walk. Josephine Uray Lattimer stated that what her great-grandmother and the others were put through was “beyond human endurance”<sup>13</sup>. Mary’s Grandmother told her that the children would constantly be crying “from hunger, weariness and illness,” but no amount of tears would ever console those forces to make this journey.<sup>14</sup>

The time of year this took place there was little food for the people to live off of and supplies were very meager; those who were sick and frail, often died by the side of the road. The weather was rainy and cold, this made roads nearly impassable. Josephine Uray Lattimer told Amelia Harris of the Federal Writers Project the heart-wrenching story of her Great-Grandfather’s death on the trail<sup>15</sup>. Because of the conditions, many who walked this trail became sick and died. Josephine’s great-grandfather had gotten Cholera. The soldier in-charge of their group told her great-grandfather he would have to be let go because they couldn’t afford to have an outbreak. So the wagon train stopped, sick and dying he was set at the side of the road. Josephine’s great-grandmother told the man that if he was going to let go of her husband he would need to let her and her three children go as well. The man warned them that they would be left to fend for themselves and the woman stood by her word. All she had was a shawl from their home and some honey and flower, which she carried to feed her six-month old baby. She asked if the soldier in charge could spare blankets and food for her children and she

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13 Harris, Amelia. "Family Stories from the Trail of Tears: Josephine Uray Lattimer."

14 Bird, Billie "Family Stories from the Trail of Tears: Mary Hill."

15 Harris, Amelia. "Family Stories from the Trail of Tears: Josephine Uray Lattimer."

was given one blanket and one day's rations. Her husband, barely conscious, said to her by his loving nickname for her:

*"Dear Little Blue Hen, why didn't you take the children and go on, I can't last much longer, and my Soul will rest much easier if I knew you were safe. My body is just dust and will be all right any place." She replied, "As long as you live I'll be with you, Dear." Then the Little Blue Hen and two boys, aged ten and twelve, set about fixing a bed.<sup>16, 17</sup>"*

Mary Hill's grandmother also mentions the fact that so many would die due to the harsh condition and there would not be enough time to give them a proper burial. The sick and dying would be left by the side of the road with a bowl of water. She mentions that her husband was laid-to-rest in a box made of cedar planks and set by a creek bed, some were laid between two logs or covered with shrubbery, and others still were just left by the wayside at the mercy of the wilderness<sup>18</sup>.

John G. Burnett, from Tennessee, grew up with the Cherokee Natives. In his youth he would often hunt and fish with them. He spent so much time with them that he was able to learn their language and become almost a part of their culture. At the time of The Removal he was a Private in the military, because of his ability to communicate fluently in the Cherokee language he was sent to assist with the removal of the Cherokee People from their ancestral homes. He bared witness to the atrocities the Native People had to endure. In a letter to his

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16 Harris, Amelia. "Family Stories from the Trail of Tears: Josephine Uray Lattimer."

17 This may have been romanticized a little, but the overall circumstances remained the same.

18 Bird, Billie "Family Stories from the Trail of Tears: Mary Hill."

children, on his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, he recorded all that he remembered of, as he calls it, “the blackest chapter on the pages of American History.”<sup>19</sup>

He saw the Cherokee people arrested and dragged from their homes the day the removal began. He knew of one family who was preparing for the burial of a child who had died in the night, the soldiers came and arrested all of the family members, and the child remained there lying on a bear skin rug. Burnett didn’t know who, if anyone, eventually buried that child. Everything was left where it was, tools in the field, food in the kitchen, all were torn away and led to wait in the stockades. When the order finally came for the march to begin, Chief John Ross led the crowd in prayer and in “the chill of a drizzling October morning” nearly 650 wagons began heading toward the west.<sup>20</sup>

He did what he could to ease the suffering. He did all that “a Private in the army could do.” He would offer his jacket to children over night, just so that, for a while, they might have a little warmth. He states that from November 17<sup>th</sup> until March 26<sup>th</sup> the weather was horrible and the Cherokee’s plight was worse than ever. He tells how the Cherokee had to sleep on the freezing ground or in the wagons with no fires to warm them and then travel all day wearing thin clothing. The cold cause a great number of people to catch pneumonia and up to 22 people would die in one night due to ill-treatment and exposure. One of those who died was John Ross’ own wife, she gave up her jacket to a child and rode all day in the sleet and snow and died on one of the nights that Burnett was on guard-duty.<sup>21</sup>

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19 John G. Burnett’s Story of the Removal of the Cherokees

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By the end of this walk 4,000 out of the 15,000 Native Americans who made the trip had perished.. Those who had to endure this journey from the southern states to their new home in the Oklahoma territory suffered great agony and sadness. The bodies of the fallen marking the paths from the beginning of the way to the end. Not only would they have to heal from the grief of losing the lands on which their ancestors had lived for generations, they also had to bear the loss of mothers, fathers, children, elders and friends. Their suffering marks one of the most atrocious acts of inhumanity in American History.



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